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Church Claims U.S. Campaign of Harassment

Scientologists Advance Charge as Rationale for Aggressive Policies

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The Church of Scientology contends that for more than 20 years it has been the target of a systematic campaign by the United States government, together with "vested-interest pressure groups" such as the medical professions, to "suppress the church's spiritual practice and expansion."

The church advances this accusation as the fundamental rationale for its aggressive policies of defense-by-attack against individual critics, private groups and government agencies perceived as "harassing" Scientology.

Church spokesmen, moreover, expand upon the allegation of systematic persecution to suggest that the church's chronic state of conflict with the U.S. government, among others, symptomizes an erosion of democracy of the kind that presaged the rise of Fascism in Germany in the 1930s.

"Genocide didn't begin with gas chambers, it began with the suppression of a single organization," Jeffrey A. Dubron, a spokesman for Scientology's principal United States church in Los Angeles, said repeatedly during interviews with two Times reporters.

Heber C. Jentzsch, the church's chief West Coast spokesman, adds: "Religion is under attack. We're not alone . . . It could result in vast devastation of an entire society if allowed to proliferate."

In an effort to substantiate its charges of persecution, the church says it has filed more than 1,000 formal requests with federal agencies and nearly two dozen lawsuits under the Freedom of Information Act since 1973—and that by this means has amassed some 200,000 pages of internal government papers and correspondence from private citizens, government agencies that refer to Scientology.

Yet a close examination of the papers the church has culled from this mass of material and made available to Times reporters as evidence fails to reveal any explicit or unambiguous expression of interest on the part of any federal agency to "suppress" or "harass" Scientology, alone or in collaboration with any other agency or private group.

The documents do contain, as the church contends, abundant speculation and rumor about Scientology's motivations and activities, although the gossip in the government's files was usually labeled for what it was.

Overall, the papers reflect widespread skepticism that Scientology was a bona fide religion. But at the same time, government agencies appeared disinclined to regard it as subversive or dangerous.

As one informational memo circulated within the Central Intelligence Agency put it, L. Ron Hubbard, Scientology's founder, "appears to be a shrewd businessman who has parlayed his Scientology 'religion' into a multimillion-dollar business by taking advantage of that portion of society prone to fall for such gimmicks."

The church considers this typical of the damaging false information that it says has plagued Scientology from its inception.

Another CIA memo says, however, that the agency "has had no relationship with Hubbard or with the movement, nor is there any evidence available that would suggest political or subversive overtones."

During 11 hours of interviews, Dubron and Jentzsch began with the position that the government agencies such as the FBI and CIA had engaged

This is the last in a series of articles on the Church of Scientology.

"systematic harassment" of the church, in large part by circulating false information about the church's beliefs and practices to other agencies and to foreign governments.

As the evidence of intent was discussed, the two spokesmen shifted to a position that "individuals" in the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service and other agencies had acted on their own volition to suppress the church.

Still later, Dubron asserted that papers obtained under the Freedom of Information Act "at the very least demonstrate gross incompetence" on the part of agencies handling matters relating to Scientology—ranging from the church's requests for tax exemption to visa applications from foreign Scientologists.

"We feel we will be able to prove intent (to harass)," Dubron said, adding in reference to the material obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, "we feel certain it is in there."

If such evidence does not emerge, Dubron said, it may be that it is hidden in additional files the government has refused to surrender under exemption clauses in the act. Or, he said, federal officials may have destroyed such evidence to avoid embarrassment or never committed their intentions to paper in the first place.

This hypothesis is not implausible, but it does run counter to the success that other controversial organizations have had in prying deeply embarrassing documents from federal agencies by means of the Freedom of Information Act.

EXCERPT

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